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Afghanistan

Kabul

NATIONAL MUSEUM OF AFGHANISTAN (formerly KABUL MUSEUM; officially MUZYAM-MILLI-YI AFGHANISTAN), Darulaman, Kabul, Afghanistan.

Amir Habibullah who ruled Afghanistan from 1901 to 1919 collected rare and unusual objects, including weapons and accoutrements inlaid with gold and precious stones. The amir's brother Nasrullah was a discriminating collector of illuminated manuscripts. In 1919 the amir was assassinated, and Nasrullah was consigned to a prison inside the Karul Arg (citadel), where he died.

King Amanullah, third son of Amir Habibullah, seized the throne in 1919 and in that same year transferred both collections to Bagh-i-Bala (High Garden), a graceful nineteenth-century domed and arcuated palace on a hill overlooking Kabul, capital city of Afghanistan. The amir's collection was later returned to the stoutly walled Arg for security reasons and displayed in the Koti Baghcha (Garden Pavilion), which was officially inaugurated as the Kabul Museum by King Amanullah in November 1924. The first museum director, Ghulam Mohayuddin, was assigned at this time.

Nasrullah's manuscripts were placed in the mausoleum of Amir Abdur Rahman (reigned 1880–1901), father of Amir Habibullah, outside the Arg, which was opened to the public as the Kitab Khana-i-Melli (National Library). During the civil war that brought about the downfall of King Amanullah in 1929, the library was looted, and many fine folios were destroyed.

Peace was restored at the end of 1929, and in 1931 the Kabul Museum reopened in the suburb of Darulaman, six miles southwest of Kabul in the same building housing the National Museum today. This International Style building had been built in 1927 as a town hall and has many shortcomings as a museum. No major

efforts to improve display facilities were made until 1957–58, when the Begram and Islamic rooms were redesigned. About 1965 the Kabul Museum was renamed the National Museum of Afghanistan. East and west wings were added in December 1977.

A bloody coup in April 1978 established the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan (DRA). In June 1979 the DRA determined to turn Darulaman into a military zone, a last refuge for a leadership beset by revolts. Consequently, the museum collections were boxed and stored. The return of the objects to the former museum building in Darulaman began in April 1980, and the National Museum reopened to the public on October 13. A potsherd study collection for students was prepared in 1981.

The museum is administered and funded by the Ministry of Information and Culture of the central government. It is a supporting institutional member of the International Council of Museums, a nongovernmental organization of UNESCO. The National Museum is also responsible for the small, mostly poorly organized provincial museums at Kandahar (major city in the Southwest), Mazar-i-Sharif (in the North), and Herat (in the Northwest), all founded in 1933. The Ghazni Museum, south of Kabul, was founded in 1935, but in 1966 it was shifted to the restored mausoleum of Sultan Abdur Razaq, a superb example of sixteenth-century A.D. Timurid architecture, and renamed the Museum of Islamic Art. Escalating revolts following the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan in December 1979 has led the DRA to contemplate the transfer of all provincial collections to the National Museum in Kabul.

Site museums at Ghazni and Hadda, near the eastern border, were established during the 1960s. The Hadda Museum was destroyed in 1980 during antigovernment revolts. The Ghazni Museum remained unscathed as of November 1981.

The National Museum of Afghanistan is unique in many ways. The overwhelming majority of its present holdings were scientifically excavated from Afghan soil. The displays record fifty thousand years of Afghanistan's cultural history almost without interruption, from the Middle Palaeolithic period to the ethnographic present. Many specific collections have no parallels elsewhere. In short, the National Museum of Afghanistan ranks among the most opulent cultural depositories in the world.

A transitional Middle Palaeolithic flake-blade industry dating thirty thousand to fifty thousand years ago was excavated in 1966 from sites in the northeastern province of Badakhshan. A human skull fragment with both Neanderthal and *Homo sapien* characteristics was found in association with these tools. These important displays indicate that Afghanistan represents a transitional zone where various modern civilizations developed and, with the advent of the Upper Palaeolithic blade industry, began to revolutionize Stone Age technology.

The twenty thousand Upper Palaeolithic flint implements recovered from northern Afghanistan in 1962 and 1965 are of such high quality and beauty that experts have described the tool makers of Aq Kupruk as the Michelangelos of the Upper Palaeolithic era. Among the unique holdings from this period is a sculptured

object representing a human face that is possibly the oldest sculpted piece found in Asia, dating about fifteen thousand years ago.

The appearance of the Neolithic at Aq Kupruk about nine thousand years ago indicates that northern Afghanistan was an early center for the domestication of plants and animals. Guaranteed food supplies permitted the growth of the great Bronze Age urban civilizations in the Nile, Tigris-Euphrates, and Indus river valleys. Between these centers provincial cities grew in response to specialized supply needs, and trade routes flourished. Graceful painted pottery goblets, sculptured human and animal figurines, necklaces of semiprecious stones, copper mirrors, and seals of copper, bone, and steatite excavated at Mundigak near Kandahar from 1951 to 1958 speak of a burgeoning city life during the third to second millennium B.C. Mother Goddess figurines from Mundigak and its nearby village supplier at Deh Morasi Ghundai, excavated in 1951, speak of emerging religious cults.

Fragments of five gold and twelve silver vessels dated about 2500 B.C. were recovered in 1966 from Tepe Fallol near the famous lapis lazuli mines of Badakhshan. They carry artistic motifs relating to India, Iran, Mesopotamia, and Central Asia, attesting to an intensive lapis lazuli trade between these areas during the second half of the third and the end of the second millennium B.C. Evidence for direct contact with the Harappan culture is provided from the site of Shortugai, also in the Northeast. These extensive finds include examples of the famous Indus Valley seals. Excavations began in 1975.

Material excavated since 1965 at Ai Khanoum, the easternmost Greek city yet known and the largest Greek town plan found outside of Greece, date from the fourth to the second century B.C. Evidence points to the possibility that this outpost on Afghanistan's northeastern border was established by order of Alexander the Great, who sojourned in the Afghan area from 330 to 327 B.C. A permanent Ai Khanoum exhibit, opened in 1981, provides striking evidence of the determination with which these Greek colonists maintained their own culture while living five thousand miles away from their homeland. Delphic oracle inscriptions, tombstones inscribed in Greek, mosaic flooring, Greek gods and goddesses, herma, comedy masques, dolphin fountainheads, and Ionic capitals are among the stunning testimonies. They illuminate the development of art styles in this pivotal area.

Greek and Aramaic inscriptions give evidence of the extension of Eastern influences under Mauryan King Ashoka, who ruled northern India from 268 to 233 B.C. The inscriptions found at Kandahar in 1963 and 1967 are the westernmost *Ashokan Edicts* yet discovered, and they represent the only *Ashokan Edicts* written in Greek, indicating the presence of an important Greek-speaking community in Kandahar.

An amazing hoard of more than twenty-one thousand gold ornaments, many studded with semiprecious stones including lapis lazuli, was excavated in 1978 from Tillya-tepe (Golden Hill) near Shibarghan in northern Afghanistan. This hoard dates from the first century B.C. to the first century A.D. soon after the

arrival of the Yueh-chih from Central Asia. In addition to being sophisticated masterpieces of ancient art, these pieces will contribute immeasurably to the now hazy understanding of the founding of the Great Kushan Empire during the first to the third century A.D., when the Afghan area sat at the center of an empire stretching from north-central India to the Gobi desert.

Tillya-tepe was a sepulchral mound for early Kushan nobility. A little more than fifty miles east of Tillya-tepe a gigantic fifty-foot-high mound rises above a now starkly barren desert waste. Delbarjin-tepe, excavated since 1969, represents a city founded in the Achaemenid period in the sixth century B.C. that blossomed at its peak under the Kushans, who embellished interior walls with paintings during the fourth to fifth century A.D., using both Buddhist and Hindu motifs. Many of these murals were painstakingly removed and are now displayed in the Bakhtar (Bactrian) room opened in November 1980.

The magnificent Begram collection of incomparable beauty and diversity speaks of Kushan affluence. The approximate 1,772 artifacts excavated at Begram (ancient Kapisa) north of Kabul, in 1937 and 1939, date mostly from the height of Kushan power during the mid-second century, when Kapisa was the Kushan summer capital on the fabled Silk Route between India and China. The collection includes carved ivories in classic Indian styles, Chinese lacquers, and an infinite variety of Roman bronzes, plaster matrixes, and glass from Alexandria, including large painted goblets that had been known only by fragments before the Begram excavations. The museum's ancient glass collection is unequaled.

From the same general periods are scores of schist and limestone relief sculptures in the Gandharan style. They adorned Buddhist complexes established during the Kushan period in the valleys north of Kabul and at Kunduz, on the Turkestan plains north of the Hindu Kush mountains. Sculptured pieces from Surkh Kotal just north of the Hindu Kush, where excavations began in 1952, include statues of the most renowned Kushan king, Kanishka, who ruled about 128, and the first lengthy inscription in the Kushan language ever found. It is written in Greek script. Other important finds from Surkh Kotal are the carved capitals and pilasters with Classical, Iranian, and Central Asian elements that give rise to new interpretations of the development of Gandharan art. It now appears that the Afghan area was the experimental ground from which these Western forms moved to mix with the styles of northern India.

Stucco and clay-molded sculpture also from Buddhist monasteries of this and later periods at Hadda, Tepe Sardar at Ghazni, and in Kabul are so extensive that only a small portion can be displayed. Hadda, although extensively excavated in 1923, during the 1930s, and again from 1965 to 1980, continued to give forth treasure and much more lies untapped. Since 1967, the Tepe Sardar excavations have produced a wealth of material including polychrome wall paintings, mosaic flooring, and some of the finest clay statuary recovered to date. Tepe Sardar's peak period occurred during the seventh-eighth century.

Some 348 elegant, highly refined seventh-century clay sculptures in the museum collection from Fondukistan in the central mountains were excavated in

1937. In addition, 169 examples of the famous frescoes at Bamiyan, also in the central mountains, may also be viewed in the museum. Archaeological investigations at Bamiyan, where two colossal standing Buddhas, thirty-eight and fifty-five meters tall, were carved into a limestone cliff during the third and fourth centuries, began as early as 1922. The frescoes date from the eighth and ninth centuries. The art from these sites exhibits a complex hybrid style strongly permeated with influences from India, Sasanian Iran, and Central Asia that spread along the trade routes of Central Asia and passed into China from where they were disseminated to Japan and Southeast Asia. They illustrate Afghanistan's continued importance as a point of artistic diffusion throughout its early history.

Exciting evidence of Hinduism, which flourished under Hindu Shahi rulers during the sixth to ninth century, is provided by a number of masterful marble sculptures exhibiting styles unique in the history of Indian art. They shed welcome light into the murky corners of this transitional period before Islam was introduced to the Afghan area.

The most brilliant Islamic period unfolded under the Ghaznavids, whose capital was at Ghazni. This period from the tenth to twelfth century is well represented in the museum by high-quality bronzes, marble reliefs, ceramics, and frescoes. Also included in the total of almost five thousand items from the Islamic periods are examples of sixteenth-century miniature painting from the Timurid capital at Herat. The large manuscript collection containing countless miniatures, however, no longer resides in the National Museum. It was removed in 1966 and relocated in the National Archives, which opened in 1980.

A small collection of canvases by the first Afghan artists to experiment with Western techniques exists, but there have been no systematic attempts to develop this collection.

The museum's coin collection of more than thirty thousand items is one of the most extensive in the world, ranging from the pre-Achaemenid period in the eighth century B.C. to the modern periods. The Greek coins found accidentally in Kabul in 1930 offer the first evidence of the spread of Greek coinage into the Afghan area during the Achaemenid period in the sixth century A.D. The Graeco-Bactrian Kunduz hoard found in 1946 is the finest collection of Graeco-Bactrian coins in existence. In addition to containing the largest Greek coins ever discovered, this cache of more than six hundred coins dating from the third to second century B.C. is distinguished for its artistry and consummate craftsmanship.

The ethnographic collection included in the museum's original holdings was not returned to the museum when it reopened in 1980. It remains in storage pending the projected opening of a special ethnographic museum. The most stellar attractions in this collection are twenty unsurpassed Kafir ancestral wooden effigies from Nuristan dating from the days before this area in eastern Afghanistan was converted to Islam in 1895–96.

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